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ABSTRACT

A discussion of reading instruction for disadvantaged children leads the author to explore previous definitions of "disadvantaged" and redefine the goals in teaching disadvantaged children. Individualized reading instruction is urged and two programs--one in Florence, South Carolina, and one in Gary, Indiana--are compared. The Florence program was designed to increase the students' self-confidence by providing ways for them to experience success in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The Gary program agreed that self-confidence building was important but emphasized the cognitive more than the affective domain. The Florence program included an initial administration of reading tests to the students, a screening of teachers to find which ones wanted to teach classes of disadvantaged students, and a five day inservice workshop for teachers. The workshop outlined objectives, emphasized the importance of teaching students at their own levels, and deemphasized the importance of drill in teaching reading skills. The Gary program had only a one-half day workshop in which traditional, cognitive approaches to reading were outlined. Recommendations for reading programs for the disadvantaged are made. References are included. (AL)

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READING INSTRUCTION FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

The relatively new emphasis upon education for the disadvantaged has found few teachers well prepared for the teaching of reading to these students who are in such need of their competence. The refined intention in this paper is to persuade secondary teachers to seek assistance which is essential to them as reading teachers. Such assistance can be found in periodical institutes and workshops which will increase their knowledge and enable them, as teachers, to combat some of the malignancies resulting from the disadvantagement of their students. Several questions require consideration and response: How much are teachers willing to do in order to develop more proficiency in reading for the disadvantaged student? Are teachers willing to establish reading as a priority in our schools, or will they fool themselves into complacency by assigning more and more of the usual analytic

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renderings of literature? What kinds of responses can be expected from these students who have limited backgrounds? On the other hand, what is expected of teachers who are channeled to comply with the system?

There are tremendous pressures placed on the disadvantaged students, as well as on the teachers, to make these students reach the designated national average, as though paradise must lie in that direction. Yet, to be average means to perform below the norm of the expected level, and then to be euphemistically labelled "underachiever". In many instances these standards are set up by panels of individuals who have, for years, ignored causes that would determine the fate of these students who would eventually become underachievers.

First, let us define the labelling term, "disadvantaged". Cohen and Reinstein (3) refer to the disadvantaged as victims of the insidious practice called "drop out" because they could not meet the timetable and rate and, for various reasons, could not accept the content of their courses. Authorities such as Lewis (6) interpret labelling terms as inaccurate and meaningless, and indicate that some of these tags might even arouse hostility. Lewis further states that labelling individuals can affect planning and programming. According to Livingston, (7) some teachers perceive these students, who have been labelled disadvantaged as slow, lazy, brain-damaged, or emotionally disturbed, depending upon the current fad. According to the Division of Compensatory Education (4), BESE (Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education), the disadvantaged child is poor; his family relationships, most probably,

are unstable; desertion, illegitimacy, relatives, and lodgers comprise his familiar background. He and his family live in a depressed neighborhood. He brings to school an unfamiliarity with the written word, and by the ninth grade, he may be from one to six years retarded in reading. Far more importantly, positive attitudes toward education, such as the desire to achieve and learn, are crudely formed or entirely lacking. We (BESE) could call him an underachiever and be accurate, but this term cannot capture the full import of what deprivation really means. Many Caucasians interpret "disadvantaged" as a label synonymous with "Negro" or "black", although this fact is disputed by some writers. In keeping with the aforementioned definition, the term "disadvantaged" will be used in this paper to refer to any child who is born in, or brought to America, with all or part African heritage and who, therefore, must suffer the consequences of being deprived in one way or another.

Students invariably know when they are being labelled, whether as individuals or in a group and this, in turn, may cause them to develop negative attitudes toward the whole reading process and to become rebellious toward society. It is relatively easy for teachers on the secondary level to pass on the blame for such deficiencies and attitudes to teachers and schools of the past, which they regard as poorly qualified; in addition, some teachers make explanatory remarks about the disadvantaged students themselves, such as "It's their environment", or It's their heritage".

It takes courage for a student to admit being "disadvantaged" while he is striving to acquire, in a few months, what other students with unlimited opportunities have gained over a period of many years. Even if such attainments were possible with a subject as complex as reading, students on or above reading level, exposed to such a crash program, would make even greater advances. Consequently, there would still remain the gap to bridge or the catch-up race to be run by the disadvantaged student.

Programs may be organized, training procedures prescribed, data of all sorts obtained, and expensive materials and equipment purchased, but unless each student is thought of and worked with as an individual, most of the time and effort of both teacher and student has gone to waste. The fact must be faced that the individuality of students does exist, and that there is difficulty in convincing secondary teachers that a single textbook cannot solve the problems of an entire class. (5)

The purpose of this paper can best be developed by means of contrasting, in most instances, and comparing in others, two papers previously presented at International Reading Associations, descriptive of exemplary reading programs in separate school systems. Reports of these two programs in Florence, South Carolina, and Gary, Indiana, were made by Louise Scott (9) and Jennye Alsobrooks (1) respectively.

Recognizing Individualism

Louise Scott (9) viewed the Florence, South Carolina, Public Schools as having recognized the need for individualized instruction in reading beyond the elementary level, and having done something about it. This

program was designed to help the high school student increase his self-confidence, and to provide ways for him to experience success and coordinated training in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Consequent to their program, the number of dropouts was reduced and the students' enthusiasm for reading was greatly increased.

Alsobrooks, (1) who described the reading program in Gary, Indiana, does not disagree with the concept that the disadvantaged should be given self-confidence. Other authorities go even further to state that the parents should be included in such enlightenment since the lack of positive self-concept is fostered in the homes of many disadvantaged students. Lewis (6) supports the idea that parents should be involved and avers that they should be given the highest priority. Though this may be true, it is more easily said than done. Alsobrooks (1) does not reveal how the teacher will go about including parents, if once the opportunity presents itself to communicate with these parents. On the other hand, both school systems could make use of the suggestions offered by Lewis for the involvement of parents.

Tests

Scott (9) reported that the procedure in the Florence Public Schools began with the administering of reading survey tests. Consideration cannot be given to this initial step without a reminder to the teachers that many important objectives will not be measured by reading tests. Giving support of this fact, Cebulash (2) states that standardized tests should not be the sole measure of reading achievement and ability, but should be

supplemented by diagnostic tests and inventories which, in totality, will provide a more accurate picture of each student's reading skills and weaknesses. Furthermore, Graham (5) says that students should be told of these weaknesses and of their strengths. In conjunction with his statement, Graham reveals some of the deceptions of secondary students, who often will not even try to answer questions on tests because of their previous repeated failures throughout earlier grades. Thus the question is posed as to the validity of test results. This term, "validity", is characterized by Livingston (7) as being a slippery and cover-all term that conceals the fact that there are several kinds of validity: content validity, face validity, concurrent validity, predictive validity, and construct validity. In other words, teachers should beware of pitfalls in the interpretation of tests.

With full knowledge of these pitfalls and great care to avoid them, the Florence Public Schools chose to use the test results with two groups, experimental and control, depending on the level of difficulty in reading, as a basis on which to organize a four-phased program.

Attitudes

The second step was to choose teachers who had an interest in and a desire to participate in the program. Along with this concern should come their grasp for self-betterment of themselves as teachers, and an optimistic vision for their students, to be realized through effective teaching techniques. According to Alsobrooks, (1) any teacher is a teacher of reading, whether or not he is interested in or desires to work

with disadvantaged students.

Both Scott (9) and Alsobrooks (1) concurred that education is developed through the rapport existing between teacher and student. Alsobrooks (1) went so far as to list ten tips by which respect may be gained from the students; these are, incidentally, unnecessary if all students are truly thought of by their teachers as human beings, and are given equal shares of respect in their own rights. If teachers simply swallow Alsobrooks' prescription without employing their own sound judgments and imaginations, their objectives as teachers are depleted before they begin.

Plan of Operation

A distinct advantage of the program in the Florence Public Schools is the fact that it included a five-day workshop, instead of the mere half-day workshop in Gary, Indiana.

Some systems develop periodical workshops to explain and demonstrate materials alone, while other systems set aside released time of one day a month for reading teachers to attend workshops. According to Zimmerman (10), "only a handful of teachers in the secondary schools have ever had a single course in the teaching of reading - let alone become expert at the job". Of what assistance, then, can a half-day workshop be to a teacher trained in a content area other than reading?

Admittedly, it is true that years of advanced training are a prerequisite for teaching; inservice training, however, is thought to be infinitely more important in the making of a good teacher than pre-service

training. The workshop can be that means to the end of organizing new teachers who may garner viable ways of teaching reading from experienced teachers, in exchange for their own innovative ideas. A well-planned workshop can be the realization, by one teacher, that other teachers have similar problems and he may learn the solutions used to eradicate these problems.

To return to the comparison of the two separate school systems, the Florence School workshop purported to outline objectives, to stress the importance of teaching the students on their levels of achievement instead of teaching books, and to help each student realize his potentials, rather than to employ the popular method of repeated practice drills of reading skills with which the students are usually already familiar. In other words, the popular system involves covering a said-text book and a said-number of pages by a said-deadline, which are to be regurgitated on a said-day in a wrestling match between note paper and lead pencil. Thus, time is wasted, energy expended and little, if any, progress is made.

The half-day workshop in Gary, reported on by Alsobrooks, (1) included the encouragement of teachers to use the Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review (SQ3R) study plan as a means of stimulating students. The study plan is a poor excuse as a stimulant for underachievers, since it, in itself, requires mastery of certain skills in reading. Alsobrooks seems, as well, to give her blessing to a reading teacher who began her classes by explaining the reading process. It is obvious then, that

whereas the Florence Public Schools opened with a plan in the affective domain, the Gary workshop employed the cognitive domain. The imagination could not possibly devise a more lackluster beginning for a class of disadvantaged readers.

Both Scott (9) and Alsobrooks (1) conceived of the psychological value of selecting materials adjusted to the maturity and needs of the students. Some of the aids listed by them included: newspapers, forms, (e.g. application, social security, insurance) telephone directories, magazines, practice books, tapes and paperbacks. In addition to these, Loretan and Umans (8) listed in their book, Teaching the Disadvantaged, excellent materials which might be used for young adults.

Results

Evaluative results of the Gary program were not given, but innovators of the Florence program indicated growth in the affective and the cognitive domains by stating, respectively, the students' verbal admissions of the realization of success and the results of statistical data.

Recommendations

Subsequent to a detailed appraisal of these two programs this author makes the following recommendations:

To the teacher:

1. Have a desire and an interest to work with the "disadvantaged" children.

2. Have a knowledge of what is to be taught.
3. Have a mastery of techniques to be used in that which should be taught.
4. Above all, have the belief that the students can achieve certain proficiencies.

Furthermore, a program for the school and the teacher:

1. Should be guided by needs of the students and sound objectives;
2. Should include training for administrators, teachers and aides, by means of periodical institutes and workshops or other feasible training sessions or projects;
3. Should provide materials, equipment and opportunities to meet its needs and objectives;
4. Should include testing instruments which measure beyond the reading skills to be developed.

Conclusion

To summarize, inasmuch as these children are labelled "disadvantaged," individualization is the proper step to take toward tailoring a program to meet their needs. All programs should include an intensification of the instructional plan in such a way that the skills which ought to be acquired and the level and rate at which they can be acquired are compatible with the students and their needs.

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